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ABSTRACT

In Ireland, children learn Irish and perhaps another second language in school, but use English almost exclusively outside those classes. In addition, the classes most concerned with communication (i.e., language classes) are those the most empty of material about which to communicate. This experience with language learning may diminish students' perception of other languages as relevant. While it is commonly held among language teachers that they should associate language with situations outside the classroom, it is difficult to do this authentically. One way of turning language into an asset is to use the target language for classroom management, which provides a rich source of communication needs, but this effort can be lost in the hours between language classes. The isolation of the language class can be counteracted by introducing language lessons into other areas of the curriculum, linking language and subject matter. Studies of partial and full immersion courses show that performance in the target language is positively affected and achievement in the content areas does not suffer. If subject matter is covered both in the language course and in its own course, the subject matter and language learning are both reinforced. (MSE)

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TEACHING OTHER SUBJECTS THROUGH THE TARGET LANGUAGE.

Language Syllabi have since the '70s moved to the communicative approach. The traditional grammar translation method has been replaced with the recognition that language has a purpose, i.e. communication. The main advantage of this new trend is the encouragement and motivation of the learner by introducing "real" use of the target language and authentic materials. Yet there is an inherent danger in this philosophy also. By adopting a communicative syllabus one has not discovered a panacea for all ills. No indeed, we may even be cultivating a new strain of virus.

Through misinterpretaion of what is entailed in a communicative approach to language teaching there has in some instances, been an overconcentration on the oral and too great an emphasis laid on survival skills and transactional activities. True, it is important to be able to ask the way, book a ticket, shop in a foreign language but for many of our learners this is not and may never be a reality. The foreign language remains a school subject locked in isolated time slots during the school week. Learners in Ireland are rarely exposed to other languages as are their counterparts in mainland Europe. The majority of the population have English as their first language and though the Constitution recognises both Irish and English, practically everything that appears or is said in Irish is translated into English, thereby undermining the relevance and validity of one or other system. As English is the language of the majority Irish tends to come off worse. This experience then may be transferred to the learning of other languages and the learners perception of language as relevant is diminished.

May I illustrate the above point with an actual experience drawn from a class-room, which I call "Learning with Harold". A beginner's class full of enthusiasm and anxious to try out their communicative skills on the young language assistant in the school bombarded him with the usual questions concerning, name, age, address, house, family etc. and flushed with success continued till they had got details of his girlfriend. They were delighted with themselves, having got all this information using their newly acquired language! Now they dared to venture further and to the bewilderment of the language assistant and also the class teacher the next question was: "What do you speak in your country?" "German, of course" was the reply. "What do you speak to your parents?" "German", was the reply again. Not satisfied the class pushed yet further and asked "What do you speak to your

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girlfriend?" Again the answer came "German". Silence and mystification followed. Finally Harold asked the class, "Why did you ask that question?" "Well, we learn Irish, French and German in school but we speak English all the time except for those classes and we always speak it at home and with friends."

Recent studies have shown that though people are favourably disposed towards the Irish language, the lack of a real need to use or have the language affects the learners attitude and motivation.

William Littlewood puts his finger on another vulnerable spot when he says "those lessons which are most concerned with the achievement of communication are also the most empty of material about which to communicate: teacher and pupils sit there, so to speak, with a great deal of language to develop, but nothing to language about".

It is a common view among language teachers that they should try to associate the language with situations outside the classroom, with the "real world" of family, holidays, sports, pastimes etc. To do this in an authentic way is difficult, if not nearly impossible at times. The classroom is often regarded as an artificial environment, a limiting factor in the teaching of language as a true vehicle of communication. Yet the classroom in which we operate is part of the real world of the pupil, a real social context in its own right. As long as languages are to be taught in schools then we must see to it, that what might be seen as a limitation, be converted into an asset.

One way of doing this, is the use of the target language for classroom management. This provides a rich source of communication needs. Care, of course, should be taken that the use is not one-sided. Pupils can learn a great deal about negotiating in a foreign language if the classroom discourse comes from both parties involved. A recent video film of a class of 13/14 years olds in Germany managing their class work in French shown by Prof. Piepho in I.T.E. eminently proved this point. The structures and skills acquired thus transfer easily to other social contexts.

Eric Hawkins draws a very accurate picture of many a foreign language teacher's daily task. "The class arrives for its lesson babbling excitedly in English about the day's doings. The teacher shuts the door on English speech patterns, enclosing the pupils within the 'cultural island' of the language classroom, and for 40 minutes strives like a keen gardener to implant in the recalcitrant soil a few frail seedlings of speech patterns in the foreign language. Just as the seedlings are taking root and standing up for themselves, the bell goes and the class is dismissed into the English language environment.

For the next 24 hours the pupils are swept along by a gale of English, listening to different teachers, reading specialist textbooks, asking for more custard with the lunch-time pudding, surviving amid the play-ground witticisms, shouting on the games field, gossiping on the bus going home, relaxing in front of the 'telly'. Even in bed the English speech patterns shape the weird logic of dreamland.

Next morning the foreign language teacher finds yesterday's tender seedlings of French, German or Spanish lying blighted and flattened by the gale of English. She(he) gently revives and waters them but, just as they reach the condition they were in yesterday, the bell rings again and the gale of English sweeps in to destroy all, or nearly all, the patient gardener's handiwork.

One way of approaching this dilemma and to counteract the isolation of the language class is to introduce into language lessons other areas of school, introducing also the element that is lacking, concrete subject matter. By drawing other subjects on the school curriculum into the language class, one calls upon the reality of the pupil's own experience and the teaching of language has a dual role: to provide the learners with useful knowledge and to engage them in purposeful communication in the foreign language. It ensures a link with reality and foreign language can relate to the outside world indirectly through many subject areas.

Traditionally the language teacher has been expected to teach not only the language structures but also to deal with the literature and cultural background of the target language. Precisely these areas cause the greatest difficulty for young language learners who may not yet have sufficient ease in the target language to offer any input on the material in front of him. Abstract ideas are difficult enough in one's own language and often constitute a real barrier for learners at secondary level.

By turning to subjects such as history, geography, general science, art, sport, one is dealing with subject matter already recognised by the pupil as being necessary if not also relevant to his present programme. It reinforces the positon of languages in the curriculum and the gale may not wreak such damage as described by Eric Hawkins.

Another result of borrowing from subjects normally taught by colleagues, is in the area of definition of aims. Defining the aims in a language programme is often expressed in terms of remote objectives and this does not provide the student with any immediate motivation. Other subject areas have more clearly defined topics or tasks, and pupils can see and measure their progress with the completion of each topic. This pychological encouragement could now

be available in language classes.

Studies of immersion or partial immersion courses have shown that teaching other subjects through the medium of the target language is strongly and positively related to achievement in that language and that performance in the other school subjects does not suffer. This has been documented in reports on Bilingual education in Ontario and we have evidence of the same from schools in non Gaeltacht areas, where subjects are taught through the medium of Irish. Both in Canada and in Ireland the majority of pupils in such immersion programmes do not use the target language at home and yet their mastery of the target language and performance in other subjects is high.

Perhaps the over concentration on language usage in the language class militates against the acquisiton of language. Normal communication operates on a level very different from the way the foreign language learner is required to learn. The language teacher directs the attention of the learner to those features of performance which normal use of language requires him to ignore and so puts the learner at a remove from his own experience and increases the difficulty of the learning task. If subject matter is covered both in the language course and also in the specialist course the learner can recognise that acts of communication, like identification, instruction, description etc., are expressed in the foreign language in one way and in his own language in another. By equating both languages with reference to their use in communication the value of both languages is impressed upon the learner.

I would strongly recommend the idea of teaching other subjects through the target language and have had personal experience that by doing so it raises the pupils' interest in the language, motivates them and strengthens the position of foreign language in schools.

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